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TAGS: PREL PGOV OSCE RS

SUBJECT: ODIHR DIRECTOR STROHAL'S VISIT: OSCE "REFORM" AND RUSSIA'S 2008 ELECTIONS

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells.

Reasons: 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a September 19 meeting with OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Director Strohal, DFM Grushko emphasized once again Russia's desire for OSCE "reform." However, ODIHR's harshest critic had much softened his tone, according to Strohal, while still pushing for specific changes to ODIHR election monitoring in time for the Brussels Ministerial. Strohal also met with Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin to discuss the NGO registration process. Central Elections Commissioner Aleksandr Veshnyakov told Strohal that Russia planned to invite an ODIHR team to observe Russian elections, but the MFA was less certain, asserting that Moscow wanted progress on OSCE reform before making a decision. End Summary.

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BANGING ON THE REFORM DRUM

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¶2. (C) Strohal told guests at a working lunch hosted by the Belgians that his discussions with DFM Grushko had been constructive and that Grushko had been pragmatic. Grushko had reiterated standard GOR complaints that OSCE placed excessive emphasis on the human dimension and that ODIHR was focused too much on east-of-Vienna monitoring. In a later conversation with ODIHR Russia Desk Officer Holly Ruthrauff (please protect), she told us that despite the usual barrage of criticism about ODIHR methodology, Grushko had been more conciliatory than expected. Grushko did argue that the ODIHR handbook was not an OSCE document because it had never been formally endorsed by the OSCE Permanent Council (PC). He warned that Moscow believed there was much work to be done with ODIHR before the Brussels Ministerial in December.

¶3. (C) In a follow-up with the MFA Acting OSCE Desk Director, Vladimir Yanin asserted that that the GOR's objections to OSCE methodology were not political but "purely of a technical nature." However, the "technical" changes Russia would like to see would give Moscow a veto over monitoring missions. Yanin said Russia wanted ODIHR to produce an annual list of elections which would be presented to the Permanent Council for its decision as to which countries ODIHR would send its monitoring teams. Moscow also wanted the election monitoring Heads of Mission to be selected by the Permanent Council, that the role of short-term election observers be more clearly specified, and that OSCE official languages other than English also be used in monitoring.

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NGO REGISTRATION

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¶4. (C) Strohal told his lunch guests that he had pitched Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin on a joint program on human rights in the military; Lukin was interested but noncommittal. Lukin discussed the NGO registration process with Strohal, explaining that he was gathering information

from the regions and would then make a decision on whether concerns needed be raised with the GOR. Strohal met separately with local NGOs, who noted their concerns over implementation of the NGO laws and uncertainty about their legal requirements.

RUSSIAN ELECTIONS

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15. (C) Central Election Commissioner Aleksandr Veshnyakov made clear in his meeting with Strohal that Russia plans to invite an ODIHR team to observe Russian elections, according to ODIHR's Ruthrauff. Only after ODIHR's needs assessment -- which ODIHR plans as early as next June -- would the scope of monitoring be clarified. Ruthrauff told us later that that there were fears that no matter how early the needs assessment was conducted, all important "deals" would have been made in advance and the elections would become a pro forma exercise. If "early voting" was used in the upcoming elections, monitoring would become even messier and more complicated. Ruthrauff concluded that even if Russia was not satisfied with ODIHR's methodology, it would still be too damaging not to invite ODIHR to observe the 2008 elections. In poloff's discussions at the MFA, Acting Director Yanin would not discuss GOR plans vis-a-vis OSCE monitoring of 2007/2008 elections. Despite Veshnyakov's informal promise to Strohal to "invite" ODIHR, Yanin said that no clear decision had been made and that Moscow would review the situation after the Brussels Ministerial.

16. (C) In his meeting with NGO representatives, Strohal heard concerns about the use of electronic balloting, which will be first tested in Novgorod in October regional elections. Strohal raised this issue with Commissioner

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Veshnyakov, who noted that a decision to move forward with electronic ballots would be implemented gradually and be informed by the results of testing.

COMMENT

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17. (C) While Strohal attempted to spin the results of his visit in a positive fashion, it seems clear that in the run-up to Brussels we will hear increasing calls by the GOR for institutional changes that would limit monitoring mission autonomy.

BURNS